

Oman's Heritage: Forts and Castles From Rubble to Restoration

By Alison Gardner

Photos by the author, including the cover picture

Oman's ruler for the past 36 years, His Majesty Sultan Qaboos, has long declared it to be his goal to create a peaceful, inclusive modern state without neglecting "its glorious heritage, the precious evidence of its past." His extraordinary success in achieving this balance and the financial commitment on the part of the government to make it happen has revealed to the public a collection of monumental forts and castles, a window of understanding on 17th and 18th century Arabian life and times.

After 20 years of restoration, 22 sites selected from over 500 existing forts and castles in Oman offer diverse glimpses of a powerful, wealthy Arabian culture living in turbulent times at the crossroads of Asia and Europe.

Each castle and fort has distinctive engineering and architectural features that make it a physical challenge and an education to visit. For example, the Nizwa fort and its equally-impressive castle next door clearly dominate the townscape 1.5 hours drive from the capital, Muscat. The circular fort, 35 meters high and 46 meters in diameter, was originally built in the 17th century with walls so thick that its foundations had to be sunk into the ground an equal depth to its height to support the structural weight. Laced with seven staircases, seven interior wells, false doors, secret shafts and numerous vertical trapdoors to pour boiling oil or date syrup onto attackers, it was topped with 24 cannons and tons of cannon balls adding substantial extra weight to the top of the fort. Visitors may also tour the adjacent castle which re-captures the more gracious aspects of the period's culture, learning, and family life.

Each of these defensive giants was created on the orders of tribal leaders not by a central administration, some built on strategic seacoasts, others at a valuable oasis or on frankincense and myrrh trade routes. Some are built on fortifications dating



Nakhal Fort

قلعة نخل

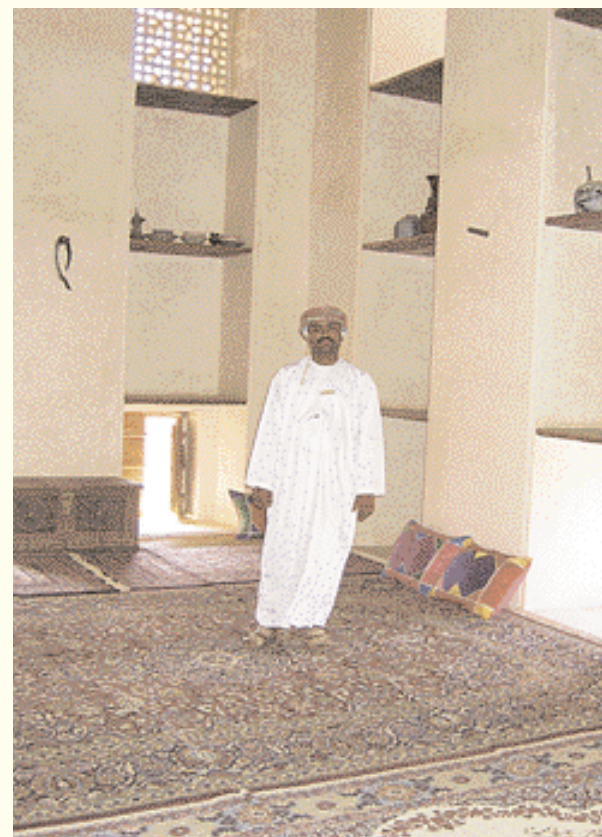
back to earlier Persian occupation or pre-Islamic times. Mirabat Castle, near Salalah in the south, holds the distinction of hosting one of the last battles in the world involving conventional attack and defence of a fortress in the mid-1970s.

Spectacular on its rocky perch, Nakhal's fortress commands a 360-degree view of verdant palm plantations and the surrounding countryside north of Muscat. It is famous for its mineral springs flowing year-round from clefts in the mountain rock right around the fortress. Among its many displays is an extensive gun collection from the 18th and 19th centuries with the unique option of being able to spend two hours at a nearby firing range to shoot many of these historic relics. The cost? A mere 45 Euros.

For more information, please logon to the Omani Tourism website:

www.omantourism.gov.om/Topics/Attractions/Castles.htm.

Alison Gardner is a Canadian travel journalist and editor. She is publisher of Travel with a Challenge web magazine, www.travelwithachallenge.com. ■



Nizwa Castle Interior

قلعة نزوى من الداخل